



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2007

Preface

van Eeuwijk, Peter ; Weichart, Gabriele

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-152423>

Journal Article

Published Version



The following work is licensed under a Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) License.

Originally published at:

van Eeuwijk, Peter; Weichart, Gabriele (2007). Preface. *Anthropology of Food*, S3:online.

Anthropology of food

S3 | December 2007 :
Food Chains

Preface

GABRIELE WEICHART AND PETER VAN EEUWIJK

Full text

- 1 This volume presents a series of articles on the pivotal role played by eating and drinking in the formation of social relationships in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Based on extensive anthropological fieldwork, they describe the everyday lives and festive mores of ordinary people in areas that range from the organisation of small households or daily snacks to the preparation of major feasts and lavish banquets. They explore the importance of rights and obligations and the different roles played by, on the one hand, pride and honour, pleasure and passion, and caring and sharing, and on the other, denial, greed and control. They reflect such dichotomies as private-public, nature-culture, tradition-modernity and local-global, also discussing gender roles, social differences, hierarchy and power and the meanings of breastfeeding and commensality. Other topics include the value of kinship and family, and the impact of medicalisation and commoditisation.
- 2 As social anthropologists, we have learned to identify human relationships primarily as the production of meaning within society and its members (the social fabric of relatedness). They represent the conceptions, creations and perpetuations of particular social contacts and bonds formed between individuals and groups of individuals. Biology is another factor, usually brought into play by the actors themselves who stress the importance of biological over social factors, claiming that, as evidenced by the concept of consanguinity, at least part of their social network is rooted in nature. Even if we adopt the view that nature itself is a social and cultural construct – and culture, therefore, a symbolic representation of nature – we also admit that emotional and social development may have a biological origin, especially in the context of the parent-child relationship.
- 3 The impact of eating and drinking, together with the preparation of food and drink in the initiation and nurturing of social relations, is very far from

negligible. Despite the fact that foodstuffs often have a very short “life expectancy”, they are ideal commodities in the real sense of the word. The offering and distribution of food and the act of commensality create bonds between the giver and the receiver, so helping to shape our sense of identity, belonging and hierarchy. Foodstuffs are particularly important due to their ambiguous status as “natural” but nevertheless “cultural” products that are ultimately absorbed by the human body. In consuming another person’s food or drink, we not only incorporate a foreign object with a specific taste and nutritional qualities, but also embody a range of qualities and meanings that have been conferred on that product by, and through contact with, its previous owner/s and society at large. Food may therefore be seen as central to the creation and reproduction of the social body. Through the act of consumption, food in all its complexity becomes part of ourselves, thus creating a bond between ourselves and the food giver. Food and drink as both biological and social mediators, unite individuals and support solidarity and cohesion within and between groups.

- 4 The offering of food and drink should ideally be an entertaining, pleasant and rewarding act for both the donor and the receiver but it can equally be perceived as an obligation, nuisance or even trauma. Food and drink directly affect our bodies and, more indirectly, our minds and souls. Whether or not those effects are beneficial largely depends on the particular qualities of the foodstuff in question and on the quantities consumed. The act of accepting food and drink from another person therefore requires confidence and trust and induces social capital, thus shaping agency. That said, it makes the receiver dependent on the donor and, by the same token, gives the latter power and control over the former.
- 5 Such “asymmetric reciprocity” may inevitably result in unequal social relationships, leading to mistrust, conflict, denial and ultimately, the breakdown of social bonds followed by exclusion.
- 6 Nowhere is this dependency and control through feeding more apparent than in the mother-infant relationship. The first article by Elsbeth Kneuper addresses this subject, placing it in the particular context of German “breastfeeding discourse”. She shows that the mother-infant relationship has been idealised and naturalised since the Age of Reformation, breastfeeding having played a decisive role in moral discourse on sexuality and maternal duty. Kneuper further argues that the idealising of the moral imperative to breastfeed can also be viewed within the broader context of the notions of kinship, family and gender roles arising from the public-private dichotomy. A “good mother” breastfeeds so as to give her baby the most natural – and therefore the healthiest – nourishment, namely her breast milk. Breastfeeding is believed to create a special mother-infant bond, reaffirming primal feelings of proximity, intimacy and kinship through the transmission of bodily substances.
- 7 Our second article by Haldis Haukanes also focuses on the woman’s duty as the family food provider. Haukanes argues that working-class and rural families in the Czech Republic, unlike for the urban, middle-classes, consider shared family meals as the exception rather than the norm. Family cohesion and identity, therefore, depend more on the woman’s cooking and distribution of food than on actual commensality. As kin-makers, women hold key positions in the family, fulfilling responsibilities and obligations but also wielding influence and power.
- 8 In our third article, Peter van Eeuwijk maintains this focus on influence and

power, which he identifies as the key characteristics of the relationship between the givers and receivers of food within the context of caring for chronically ill elderly people in urban Indonesia. Based in the Minahasa region (North Sulawesi, Indonesia), the research examines food provision and other aspects of care support in individual households. It shows that, in addition to gender, social and spatial proximity are the main criteria for becoming care providers. Close female relatives and co-residents are therefore regarded as those most “qualified” to provide care and take charge of the everyday preparation of food. Ideally at least, their enduring, intimate and trusting relationships with the elderly patient should guarantee that the latter’s nutritional needs and food preferences are taken into account. In practice, however, the quality of such relationships changes with the patient’s increasing dependence and vulnerability. Filial piety and reciprocity may come into conflict with the caregiver’s responsibility to exert control over the patient’s food intake, particularly when following a prescribed diet, in accordance with the “medicalisation” of elder care by health professionals. Sharing meals with other household members and guests is especially important for elderly patients with restricted mobility, representing one of their rare opportunities to communicate and stay in touch with the outside world.

- 9 The second part of this volume changes focus, concentrating on festive meals in particular. The first article by Gabriele Weichart, also based on research in the Minahasa region (North Sulawesi, Indonesia), examines concepts and practices of commensality in different feasting contexts in a rural area where food and eating play prominent roles. Through her case studies, the author demonstrates that even in the (semi-)public sphere – for instance, large wedding banquets or informal picnic gatherings – the offering and acceptance of food and the sharing of communal meals are meant to establish or reinforce social ties and notions of community and kinship. Such occasions, however, can also be marked by conflicting aims and ideals: the ethics of sharing, integration and equality are constantly challenged by individual ambitions aimed at enhancing personal prestige and status, and by demonstrations of wealth and power. Weichart argues that the relationship between the giver and receiver of food is, albeit temporarily, unbalanced and hierarchical, while commensality represents an at least fictive and equally temporary, egalitarian relationship.

- 10 Wedding parties and hospitality are also at the heart of the following article by Liza Debevec. In her comparison between “traditional” Muslim and “modern” civil wedding ceremonies and feasts in urban Burkina Faso, the author focuses on the different types of food served, together with their forms of preparation and consumption. Like Weichart, she argues that wedding feasts lend themselves to social networking and politicking and to displays of status by hosts and guests alike. The article does not explicitly discuss gender issues but women are undoubtedly in the firing line as hosts, cooks and guests. Additionally, Debevec places her ethnographic case studies in the context of local discourse on tradition, modernity and national or even pan-African identity.

- 11 In our final article, Florian Muehlfried also discusses the potential of food and drink and its public consumption in representing and invigorating national identity. The research is based in Georgia where the *supra*, a large and prestigious form of banquet, originally took hold as a “counter-institution” against the dominant Tsarist and later Soviet regime. Its fame outside the country itself is largely based on the ritual of wine-drinking and toasting at the

heart of the *supra*. Through their creative performance as eloquent toastmasters, the latter represent not only their own and their family's social status but also Georgian identity, history and tradition. Muehlfried shows that similar notions and sentiments are also expressed through other, less spectacular, forms and venues of consumption. Banqueting and beer- and tea-drinking, for instance are forms of socialising that reflect gender-based rituals and modes of communication. The author argues that it is through the consumption of the same kinds of food and drink that people become "kin" and form a "nation". The popular concepts of kinship and nationhood being at least partly intertwined in the context of eating and drinking, and particular consumption habits create or maintain distinctive social and national identities.

12 If, as the saying goes, "eating and drinking keep body and soul together", then food and feeding are fundamental to the processes and relationships involved in nurturing and caring. At the same time, however, food and drink also create bonds between different bodies and "souls"; they connect single persons and incorporate individuals into a larger group or community. By linking the "natural" with the "cultural" and the "physical" with the "mental", both eating and drinking, or feeding and being fed, are strategies for the identification and integration of "biological" and "social" bodies and minds. All of the authors in the present volume essentially emphasise the positive effects of social bonding and inclusion. What they also show, however, is that such processes are more often ruled by social obligations and necessities than by personal desire and will, and that individual needs may be subordinated to collective norms and standards of social practice. People and relationships in contexts ranging from the most intimate and private to the most open and public, are controlled and manipulated through the preparation and selective distribution of food and drink. Men hold powerful positions at prestigious banquets such as the Georgian *supra* or the Indonesian *pesta*, but it is the women who build and reinforce basic kinship and belonging through their daily and far less glamorous roles as cooks, food providers and carers within the household and family environment. It would be too simplistic, however, to see gender roles as part of the public-private dichotomy. As shown by Debevec and Weichart, women also play important roles in the feasting context, thus participating in the building and perpetuation of relationships, networks and affinities far beyond their immediate spheres of influence within their nuclear or extended families.

13 People are "chained" together and given a place in society through eating, drinking and feeding. The social norms, regulations and values that revolve around such activities contribute to our sense of security and belonging at individual, group and also public level. For some they are expressions of agency, while for others, they may be experienced as affirmations of an inescapable fate and unalterable social position.

14 As coordinators of the present volume, we wish to express our sincere gratitude to all of those who have made it possible by donating their time, energy, enthusiasm and patience. Our thanks to *Anthropology of Food* for accepting the manuscript and offering to publish it as a special issue; to Florence Bergeaud-Blackler, Virginie Amilien and Isabelle Téhoueyres for their efficient and straightforward handling of the publication process; to the authors for their tireless cooperation throughout the reviewing process and, last but by no means least, to the many anonymous reviewers whose dedication is reflected in the quality of the articles.

References

Electronic reference

Gabriele Weichart and Peter van Eeuwijk, « Preface », *Anthropology of food* [Online], S3 | December 2007, Online since 21 March 2008, connection on 19 April 2015. URL : <http://aof.revues.org/1742>

About the authors

Gabriele Weichart

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Austria,
Gabriele.Weichart@univie.ac.at

By this author

Makan dan minum bersama: feasting commensality in Minahasa, Indonesia [Full text]

Published in *Anthropology of food*, S3 | December 2007

Peter van Eeuwijk

Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel, Switzerland,
peter.vaneeuwijk@unibas.ch

By this author

The power of food: mediating social relationships in the care of chronically ill elderly people in urban Indonesia [Full text]

Published in *Anthropology of food*, S3 | December 2007

Copyright

© All rights reserved